

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 8 December, 2002

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

Well, it's Army-Navy Week...and it's also Advent...

So, since there's so much hype for Army-Navy Week...and not so much for Advent, I think I'll use this space to hype Advent and the coming Christmas Season.

Did you know that not all the four Gospels tell the great Christmas story?

I mean, the very familiar pictures of the manger, the shepherds, the magi, the star... these are all told only by Matthew and Luke.

Mark doesn't even mention Jesus' birth...

And John...well, John...

John approaches it from a totally different aspect: instead of talking about the physical birth of Jesus, he gets poetic and talks about the ETERNAL origins of Jesus, the Son of God (John calls him "The Word").

He sees "God-becoming-Jesus" from an ETERNAL perspective, and his words can help us understand the mystery a little better:

In the beginning was the WORD,
and the WORD was with God,
and the WORD was God...
And the WORD became flesh
and dwelled among us.
We saw his glory,
the glory that is his
as the only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth...
Grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.
No one has ever seen God;
it is the only Son,
nearest to the Father's heart,
who has made him known.

John 1:1,14,17-18

May Christ Jesus, the WORD of God, brighten your lives with grace and truth, and may the coming Christmas Break be a time to share his glory.

Good Advent...and a super Christmas!!

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

JOIN US FOR DAILY MASS

Every day at 0630 (except weekends).
Catholic Chaplain's Office.
A great way to observe Advent.

MAKE PERSONAL CONFESSION
Annual ADVENT PENANCE SERVICE.
Next Tuesday, 10 December, at the Chapel at 1930.

OPEN HOUSE
We'll be hosting an OPEN HOUSE in the Chaplain's
Office on Sunday, 15 December, from 1400 to 1700.
What this means is as follows:

- you become sick of studying, so
- you come down to our office, and
- we feed you handsomely, while
- you chill for a little bit before
- going back to the books.

This is a no-brainer.
Plan on stopping by on the 15th (I'll remind you).

CADET CHRISTMAS LITURGY
The annual CADET CHRISTMAS LITURGY will
take place at the Chapel at 1930 on Tuesday,
17 December. It's our way of saying MERRY
CHRISTMAS to all of you before we go our separate
ways over Break. More info later.

DID YOU KNOW?

CHRISTMAS:

This most popular of celebrations has a colorful history in our culture and in our religious practice.

It's not THE most important feast of the Church calendar (the EASTER event holds that distinction because the death and resurrection of Jesus is the center of our redemption and our salvation).

Still, CHRISTMAS commemorates the INCARNATION of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so it's pretty central to the whole picture.

You probably know already that no one knows exactly when Jesus was actually born. Our celebration of CHRISTMAS is not an anniversary of a SPECIFIC DATE but a yearly commemoration of a SAVING EVENT.

When Constantine legalized Christianity (AD 313), some of the pagan observances surrounding their "winter feast" (celebrating the birth of the sun) were absorbed by the Catholic Church - which felt that it was only fitting to supplant the pagan practices about the "birth of the

sun" and to focus instead on the "birth of the Son"). So the end of December became a central part of the Church Year and instantly grew in popularity.

By the 5th century, CHRISTMAS was the actual beginning of the Church Year (although by the 900s, ADVENT had replaced it and had become a period of preparation which led up to it). During the Middle Ages, CHRISTMAS ("Christ's Mass") exploded in popularity, and many of the converted tribes of Europe added their own "Winter Solstice" customs to the celebration (eg, the Yule Log, the Christmas tree, etc.).

By the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation challenged the excessive celebration of CHRISTMAS in some countries, since a lot of the customs were not directly related to the birth of Christ. In England, the Puritans condemned all celebration of Christmas as pure paganism, and when they came to power in 1643, they outlawed all celebration of the feast (along with Easter, Pentecost and Saints' Days). This Puritan attitude came to the American colonies in the 17th century.

When the Puritans lost their power in England and the monarchy returned, the celebration of CHRISTMAS was also brought back, but the religious part of it was confined to churches and to private homes. In public, it was just a time of "good will", eating and drinking (as in Dickens' "A Christmas Carol", which contains virtually no reference to the birth of Christ).

Over the last 200 years, American celebration of the day has been immensely influenced by the immigrants. The Germans brought the Christmas tree, the Irish brought the custom of putting lights in the windows of private homes (to light the way for the Holy Family as it traveled to Bethlehem), the French and Italians brought the Christmas crib, the Spanish brought the elaborate church liturgies.

But Puritanism held on in New England: in Boston, it was as late as 1856 before CHRISTMAS was a "day-off" from work. Public schools held classes on Christmas Day until 1870, and students were disciplined if they were absent. The same was true for factory workers. It was only at the end of the 1800s that all states granted legal recognition to the celebration of CHRISTMAS DAY.

So today, CHRISTMAS reflects centuries of development, as well as an ancient mixture of sacred and secular elements.

But however you look at it, the basic reason for rejoicing is an intensely religious one: the SALVATION OF GOD has dawned, and the darkness of fallen humanity has been overcome.

As the bumper-sticker has it: "Jesus is the reason for the season".

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS:

MISTLETOE:

What has become an occasion of affection for us - a kiss under the mistletoe - was a serious tradition in pre-Christian times.

Among the Druids in Britain, Ireland and Gaul, mistletoe was considered a sacred plant with powers to heal and to protect.

Because it was so sacred, enemies who met under it were expected to pledge themselves to a truce.

From this came the custom of placing it over a doorway as an invitation to peace, goodwill and hospitality.

After Britain became Christian, the use of mistletoe was forbidden because of pagan practices associated with it.

However, for a while, it was a symbol of Christ at Christmastime in Britain because of its medicinal and healing powers.

PLEASE REMEMBER IN YOUR PRAYERS

...a cadet ('03), whose mother died last week.

...a young good friend of mine who had a massive heart attack last week and who will now need a heart transplant..

...everyone participating in Army-Navy Weekend in any way.

...all our military brothers and sisters - and their families - throughout the world, especially those who will be away from their families during the coming holidays.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, I was wondering if you could help me out with these questions.

In the Bible, there are several references that allude to Jesus having brothers and sisters and Mary losing her virginity after Christ's birth. What can we say to justify the opposite? Also, could you shed some light on the Immaculate Conception and Mary living a life completely free of sin.

A: The Bible passages you refer to are as follows:

Joseph...took her into his home.

He had no relations with her

until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 1:24-25

and

Where did this man (Jesus) get such wisdom

and mighty deeds? Is he not the carpenter's son?

Is not his mother named Mary and his brothers

James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Are not his

sisters with us? Where did this man get all this?

Matthew 13:55-6

From these passages, many people object to calling Mary a virgin, but the Catholic tradition - from the beginning - has always held that she was a virgin and remained one. The Church looks at the first passage (above) and concludes that the words "until she bore a son" do not necessarily assert that Joseph and Mary had marital relations after the birth of Jesus.

Granted that it sounds as if the passage does imply marital relations, but that's only in the English translation. The original (Greek) word does not have the same implication. The Scripture scholars whom I've read say that Matthew's intention is to affirm that

Joseph is NOT the natural father of Jesus. Earlier in that same chapter, Matthew says: "...it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her..."(1:20).

Further, the New Testament never mentions any actual children of Mary and Joseph as such, and in John's Gospel (Chapter 19), at his death Jesus entrusts Mary to the disciple John rather than to any "family" members", as you might expect.

Again further, the words "brothers" and "sisters" come from a Greek word meaning "brethren". For the Jewish understanding, the word meant "cousins" and "relatives", as well as "brothers" and "sisters".

So I'm not so sure that these two passages really present a case against believing the tradition of the Catholic Church that Mary was always a virgin. Moreover, the Catholic understanding of Mary as a virgin encompasses more than just a biological statement. As one author put it:

...it is not so much because of her physical
virginity as because she gave Jesus the
individual love of her soul that the Church
extols her as a virgin...

Regarding your question about belief in Mary's immaculate conception, let me say up front that those words don't appear in Scripture, and it is unknown whether Mary herself or even the early Christians had any explicit thoughts about this Catholic belief. But as time went on, the Church looked at the angel Gabriel's words to Mary ("Hail, full of grace..." in Luke 1:28) and decided that they were a deliberate signal that Mary - as the mother of Jesus - was free of original sin (as was her Son and also Adam and Eve). In fact, in the early Church, Mary was called "the New Eve".

This does NOT mean that she didn't need Jesus' redemption, just like the rest of us. What it does mean is that because of her unique destiny as the mother of Jesus, God saw fit to preserve her from the stain of original sin from the first moment of her conception. In our case, we are freed from original sin by our Baptism; in her case, it was a unique gift of God.

The big objection to this belief, of course, is that it's not mentioned in Scripture.

The answer to that is that the Catholic tradition believes that there are beliefs which grow out of the consciousness of the Church over centuries which are not explicitly mentioned in the Scriptures AND that the Church - by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit - is preserved from making errors in identifying these.

To the silly objection that "Catholics are 'inventing' beliefs", I would say that we do not believe that we have "invented" anything. We believe that God brings forth beliefs in the Church through the Bible (which the Church compiled, by the way) and also through the common belief of the Church throughout the centuries.

The Church is a living organism, and God's Holy Spirit is the soul of that organism. The Holy Spirit is the source of belief.

Hope that gives you a perspective that you can use.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

INCARNATION:

This is a Christmas word.

By that I mean that you hear it a lot around Christmastime because it's used to describe what Catholics believe about Jesus of Nazareth.

The word itself comes from two Latin words: "in" and "carnis".

In Latin, the prefix "in" means precisely that: "in".

And the root "carnis" means "flesh".

So the word "Incarnation" means "in the flesh".

As a theological concept, it refers to the belief that Jesus of Nazareth is "God in the flesh".

St. John's Gospel puts it this way:

...and the WORD became flesh
and dwelled among us.

John 1:14

According to the Creed, we profess belief that the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity took on a human nature to redeem the world. We believe that Jesus has two natures (you and I have only one nature). Jesus' natures are these: a divine nature and a human nature. Both are united in the one person - Jesus of Nazareth.

As God, the Second Person of the Trinity is invisible, incomprehensible and timeless.

As a human (Jesus), the Second Person of the Trinity was visible, comprehensible and living in the confines of time and space. We believe that Jesus possessed a true human body, a true human soul and a true human will.

"Like us in all things but sin" is how the Scripture puts it (Hebrews 4:15).

The wording of our Creed does its best to emphasize the unity as well as the separation of these two natures of Jesus:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father.
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
one in being with the Father.
Through him, all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation,
he came down from heaven.
By the power of the Holy Spirit,
he was born of the Virgin Mary
and became man.

It took the Early Church roughly about 700 years to find an acceptable vocabulary to express its belief, and if you read theological history, you can find all kinds of controversy over the whole idea.

"Just who is Jesus?" and "What do we believe about him?" were the two questions that occupied the official Church's attention for all that time, and there were many different beliefs that got thrown out.

Some of the rejected beliefs were these:

- a) Jesus was a divine figure but not really human;
- b) Jesus was a human figure but not really divine; and
- c) Jesus was somewhere between humanity and divinity,
higher than a human being
but lower than God.

The final idea to emerge from all those years of controversy is what we've called "The Incarnation": Jesus is BOTH true God and true human.

And it's important to understand it like that.

Because if Jesus isn't truly human, then he hasn't taken our sins on himself, and we're basically unredeemed.

And if Jesus' isn't truly divine, then he can't make good on his promises, and humanity is no better off for his having come among us.

So for the Catholic Church, it isn't enough to say that Jesus was a good person with some good ideas OR that Jesus had some powers that set him apart from other human beings. These characteristics are nice enough, but they're not enough to entice people into believing in Jesus as their Redeemer.

Belief in the INCARNATION is what sets Christianity apart from the other main world-religions. We believe that our Founder was not just a good man with good ideas on a mission from God; we believe that our Founder is really "God-in-the-flesh".

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

"A saint
is someone who exaggerates
what the world neglects."
GK Chesterton

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!!

Be safe over the weekend!
Don't forget your dignity as children of God.
You're always in my prayers.
Woodie